

SOLDIERS VERSUS GUNMEN:
THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN GUERRILLA WARFARE

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PREFACE

The battles of Stalingrad, Berlin, Hue, and An Loc represent only one aspect of warfare in urban areas. Frequently in recent years, armies have been called into the cities to fight urban guerrillas. The military problems faced by an army conducting a campaign against urban guerrillas are distinct from those faced by an army that is given the mission to capture or defend a city in war. From recent examples in Latin America and Northern Ireland, it is possible to distill some common patterns of action by both guerrillas and government forces, derive some lessons from their experience and dispel some of the myths regarding urban guerrilla warfare.

The following paper is the text of a talk given to the General Session of the Military Operations Research Symposium at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, on June 20, 1973. A more detailed version of the paper was presented at the United States Army Institute for Military Assistance on September 11, 1973.

A little over two and a half years ago at the 26th Symposium of this society, a working group was formed to examine the problems of military operations in urban areas. Fighting in cities has always been a difficult task for armies. Urban growth throughout the world suggested that armies would in the future be fighting more in cities than they had in the past.

It was not merely the military problems of taking or defending cities in a conventional war that attracted our attention in the fall of 1970. There was also the challenge of urban guerrilla warfare. Urban guerrilla warfare was not a new phenomenon. One need only recall that the radial street plan and broad boulevards of Paris were designed not only to make the city beautiful, but also to facilitate cavalry charges, and to make it extremely difficult for revolutionaries to build street barricades or seize intersections and block off sections of the city. But in 1970, urban guerrilla warfare did seem to be on the rise. From Belfast to Buenos Aires, in Caracas and in Calcutta, perhaps most dramatically in Montevideo, Uruguay, the world's revolutionaries seemed to be switching their attention from the countryside to the cities. The 1960s could be described as a decade of rural insurgencies; perhaps the 1970s would become the decade of urban guerrilla warfare.¹

Unlike rural guerrilla warfare, urban guerrilla warfare was not confined to the less developed countries of the world. Terrorist bombings, assassinations, street barricades, and other forms of urban violence had become increasingly commonplace in European cities at the turn of the decade. And although it was not often mentioned in our discussions, some feared that the Black Panthers and the Weatherman factions of the Students for a Democratic Society were the harbingers of an urban guerrilla movement in the United States itself. When one recalls the great number of civil disturbances which required the use of National Guard and Federal troops, and the alarming increase in terrorist bombings, of which there were some 35,000 in 1971 alone, that threat seems less remote than it may now. To

¹ See the author's earlier piece on urban guerrilla warfare, *An Urban Strategy for Guerrillas and Governments*, Santa Monica, The Rand Corporation, P-4670/1, August 1972.

a certain extent, then, the study of actual urban guerrilla warfare elsewhere was a surrogate for the study of potential urban guerrilla warfare at home.

Have the seventies become the decade of the urban guerrilla? We are now about a third of the way into the decade; how have the urban guerrillas fared? What general observations can we make about their progress or lack of progress thus far? Times does not allow a survey of all urban guerrilla struggles, but I'd like briefly to describe the current status of a few of the better-known urban guerrilla movements in Ireland, Latin America, and the Middle East, and then offer some general observations about their success or failure.

In Northern Ireland, what began as a struggle between Englishmen and Irishmen centuries ago, and was renewed as a civil rights movement by the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland in the late sixties, has become the bloodiest urban guerrilla struggle in the world. The death toll currently approaches 900. Ten thousand have been wounded. Despite the presence of some 16,000 British troops, despite attempts to work out a political compromise, despite growing revulsion to the terrorist violence, a settlement that ends the fighting has not yet been found. The bombings and the killings continue. In the meantime, Northern Ireland has become a proving ground for new techniques and new technology of urban warfare.

The Tupamaros in Uruguay can claim to be the senior IRA, which is older but has only become active again in the last few years. Certainly the Tupamaros have been the most daring of all urban guerrillas, operating with imagination and panache unequalled elsewhere. The Tupamaros are now in their tenth year of existence, but they have nothing to celebrate. Their organization is in shambles. Three thousand suspected members, including their leader Raul Sendic, are in jail. The myth of their invincibility has been destroyed.

Across the river in Buenos Aires, Hector Campora, the new president of Argentina, has appealed to the various Peronist terrorist groups, which have been battling Argentina's military governments, to end their terrorism. In return, he has offered them amnesty. A Trotskyite group known as the People's Revolutionary Army, the most successful of the guerrilla groups, has already rejected the offer, and have vowed to go on fighting. The

People's Revolutionary Army specializes in kidnapping for ransom and extortion. Their take in the last twelve months is estimated to be more than \$13 million. In April, Eastman Kodak paid a record \$1.5 million to obtain the release of one of its executives. More recently, Ford Motor Company has agreed to pay \$1 million to insure its employees against similar abductions. Just yesterday two more business executives were kidnapped. Copying the Tupamaros' efforts to maintain a Robin Hood image, the People's Revolutionary Army often orders the ransom to be paid to charities.

In Brazil, the urban guerrillas that once operated in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo have not done well at all. Their most famous member was Carlos Marighella, who wrote the Mini-manual of the Urban Guerrilla, an uninspiring primer to begin with, made even less ~~inspiring by Marighella's~~ death in a gun battle with Brazilian police. His second-in-command was also killed. Hundreds of others died in gun battles or were imprisoned or exiled. By 1972, the harsh methods of the government forces had broken the guerrilla movements, although a high crime rate continues.

In Guatemala, guerrillas, who have been active in the eastern part of the country since the early sixties, switched their attention to the capital city in the latter part of the decade, possibly because a vigorous counterinsurgency campaign was making the countryside too dangerous for them. Guatemala City itself became the theatre of a bloody feud between leftist guerrillas and right-wing counterterrorist gangs. The most dangerous job in America was that of a Guatemalan cop. Under strong pressure from government forces and right-wing gunmen, guerrilla strength declined, and by the end of 1972, with the exception of occasional outbursts, the city was again quiet.

Israel is seldom thought of as having an urban guerrilla problem, but the city of Gaza itself and the crowded refugee camps of the Gaza Strip, which the Israeli army occupied in 1967, do constitute an urban area. Gaza remained quiet for the first few years after the occupation, but in 1970 Arab urban guerrillas, under the leadership of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), became active. The Israelis launched their campaign to counter the urban guerrillas in January 1971.

The campaign included curfews, extensive searches for suspects and weapons, preventive detention, the relocation of Arab refugees into new housing projects laid out so that entire blocks could be easily sealed off, the dynamiting of houses as a reprisal for harboring Arab guerrillas, severe punishments for closing stores because of terrorist threats, and incentives for refugees to work on the more prosperous West Bank. By the end of 1971 terrorist incidents in the Gaza Strip had dropped to about three a month. Palestinian guerrillas since then have focused much of their efforts to international terrorist spectaculars.

While each one of these cases I mentioned is unique, some general observations can be made.

1. First, urban guerrillas have demonstrated that protracted guerrilla warfare *is* possible in cities. The Tupamaros survived almost ten years in Montevideo. The IRA has fought for the past four years. They have also demonstrated that urban guerrilla warfare is a possible means of exerting political pressure. But none of the urban guerrilla movements, with the possible exception of the IRA, have been able to mobilize widespread popular support for their actions to the point that public sympathy or support interfered with government countermeasures.

2. Generally, we can see that urban guerrillas have not fared well. Urban guerrilla warfare has not yet been demonstrated to be a means of seizing power. Even weak governments, some that are not very popular, have demonstrated their capacity to survive urban guerrilla warfare. There is no progression from tactics to strategy in their struggle, and no political progression. Revolutionaries that looked to Carlos Marighella or to the Tupamaros as they looked to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara a decade ago must once again reappraise their strategy.

3. In almost all cases, it was the armies, and not the police forces, that took the field against the urban guerrillas. Perhaps this is explained by the traditionally powerful role played by the armies in many of the countries involved in comparison with the traditional institutional weakness of the police forces. It also reflects the recognition at a certain point by the government that urban guerrillas constituted a full-fledged threat to national security, demanding the commitment of the country's full military resources.

4. General Alejandro Lanusse, the former president of Argentina, once remarked that "this kind of guerrilla activity cannot be fought by military action alone. It requires the will of the people. With popular support, the military could burst the carbuncle of terrorism." Yet, despite this and other similar comments about the need for popular support, the campaigns against the guerrillas do not seem to have been accompanied by any major psychological operations or campaigns to mobilize popular support for the government. Governments seemed to concentrate more on fear than on persuasion. The message was not that it was good to be on the government's side but that it was *damn* dangerous to be a guerrilla.

5. Technology has played a very minor role in campaigns against urban guerrillas. It appears even less important than it is in contests with rural insurgents. Where urban guerrillas were defeated, it was not necessarily because government forces possessed helicopters or superior weapons. For one thing, there is simply not that much fighting involved. On the other hand, the use of non-lethal weapons in Northern Ireland has undoubtedly kept civilian casualties lower than they would have been otherwise, but their use is against rioters, not gunmen.

6. In almost all cases, government forces have resorted to extra-legal methods to deal with urban guerrillas. These include relatively mild measures such as preventive detention or the suspension of various civil rights, as well as harsher methods such as the destruction of property in reprisal for assistance given to the guerrillas, the covert sponsorship or at least tolerance of counterterrorist groups, and the systematic use of torture during interrogations. The reason for the adoption of extra-legal methods may be the nature of urban guerrillas warfare itself, particularly the impossibility of containing the guerrillas territorially, the difficulty in identifying, in the legal sense of the word, the members of the guerrilla organization, and the need to obtain intelligence quickly, especially when kidnapping or bombs are involved.

7. Not only have governments used extra-legal methods, but for the most part they got away with it. Although it is one of the objectives of the guerrillas to make the government appear repressive, brutal government measures did not alienate the masses, perhaps because they were directed against a few people and did not inconvenience the public at large. Or

possibly, urban guerrillas, even suspected urban guerrillas, simply do not arouse great sympathy among the masses. Or a third hypothesis: To the extent that the public is inconvenienced or frightened by the guerrillas themselves, it is willing to tolerate extra-legal measures against them to restore peace.

8. In many cases, terrorism by guerrillas has provoked counterterrorism by vigilante groups. The "death squads" in Uruguay and Brazil are one example. The right-wing terrorist groups in Guatemala such as *La Mano* -- "the hand" -- and the Ulster Volunteer Force in Northern Ireland are other examples. A few of these have even been covertly sponsored, or at least tolerated by government security forces.

9. Besides direct military action, extra-legal measures, and counterterror, are there other reasons for the guerrillas' apparent lack of success? An economic interpretation is tempting. A chronic high rate of unemployment does seem to be related to high levels of urban violence. Not that the urban guerrillas are all workers out of a job. Often they are well-educated, middle-class youths, but I am not talking about membership, but rather about the environment. On the other hand, prosperity seems to be a hostile environment for urban guerrillas. Let me turn to some specific examples. The Israeli government deliberately subsidized small industries and used the offer of jobs as a weapon against Arab unrest in the occupied territories. In Brazil, the government, though perhaps not tremendously popular itself and certainly not democratic, has brought about an impressive rate of economic growth in Brazil which is popular. With economic growth has come jobs. São Paulo and Rio were simply not fertile ground for sowing a guerrilla movement.

In Uruguay, the guerrillas lost much of their popularity when they launched operation *Verano Caliente* ("Hot Summer") in 1970. This operation had as its objective the destruction of Uruguay's tourist industry. Unfortunately for the guerrillas, the plan worked. Fearing violence, Argentine and Brazilian tourists avoided Uruguay and the 1970 tourist season was a bust. The lack of tourists reduced the size of the summer labor force. A lot of people were left without work, and they blamed the Tupamaros for it.

10. As I said before, no governments have been overthrown by urban guerrillas, but the survival of one at least has been virtually taken over by the army that was ordered to crush the guerrilla movement. The army began by rounding up suspects and interrogating them. During the interrogations, the guerrillas managed to convince some of their captors that the government was as corrupt as they said it was. The guerrilla organization itself was cracked, but the army has since carried on its campaign against corruption, taking advantage of the near absolute powers given it in the battle against the guerrillas. The result has been what can be described as a gradual coup. I am talking, of course, of Uruguay in order to point up the fact that the campaigns against urban guerrillas have in most cases caused severe strains in civil-military relations, in some cases imperiling the survival of the government itself.